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HOUSING NEEDS¹

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NEW YORK has devoted more effort to housing reform than any other city in America; notwithstanding this, its needs to-day are greater than those of any other American city. That is due to the magnitude of the problem; for New York has over 100,000 separate tenement houses, whereas in most American cities the tenement house is the exception rather than the rule. The outlook in the city is distinctly encouraging. The present-day tenement house, built under the existing law, is the best type of structure in the city of New York. In fact it is the only kind of building except theaters which has the safeguards that we have been taught to believe essential for the preservation of life, health and morality. The one-family house has not these safeguards, nor has the two-family house. The Asch building fire called attention forcibly to the fact that lofts, factories and office buildings lack these safeguards. The tenement house as built to-day comes nearest of any building to being properly protected, but it is still very inadequate in many particulars.

From the ideal point of view New York's greatest housing need is a thorough revision of the tenement-house law. That is a difficult thing to bring about. It would be advantageous if we could materially increase the minimum width of courts, not the inner court, 24 feet wide, but the narrower one, only six feet and six inches. Similarly, it is highly desirable to increase the size of the back yard to allow more light at the rear of the building; but it is practically impossible to do it by law. Unless we wait until the time is ripe, changes in the law are likely to mean not progress, but retrogression. The legislative game is a dangerous one.

¹ Read at the meeting of the Academy of Political Science, April 18, 1912.

The next need is the regulation of houses other than tenements. A dark inner bedroom in a two-family house is just as dangerous from the point of view of tuberculosis as one in a three or four-family house. The two-family houses which are building in the outskirts of our city are practically unregulated. They may have no yards, no windows, no toilet facilities and no running water; rooms may be as small as the builder wishes to make them, and absolutely dark; of all the safeguards thrown around the tenement dweller, none is provided in the two or one-family house. In many of our progressive western cities, on the other hand, the housing laws apply to the one and two-family houses, and the same requirement should be made in Greater New York. The great field of building operations of residence building is in Queens and in the Bronx. This is often forgotten by residents of Manhattan; actually more theaters than private residences were built in the borough of Manhattan last year. The far-sighted student, however, will look to the future of the outlying boroughs.

Much can be done in improving the enforcement of the tenement house law, by coöperation with the tenement-house department, which is doing admirable work. It is important to find out the facts and get at the view of the public official, to see the limitations under which he is working, and give him due credit for the good work he has done as well as to hold him responsible for poor work.

Another housing need is the education of tenants. The great mass of tenement-house dwellers in New York city need to be taught how to live. A large part of the housing evils in American cities are due to the people themselves, to their ignorance, their lack of leisure time and their undue hours of labor. These all make it easy to fall into bad habits of living. Similarly the landlords and builders ought to be educated. That is a much more difficult task than the education of tenants, and yet it is not a hopeless one. The height of buildings ought to be regulated, and especially the erection of high buildings ought to be checked in the outlying districts of the city. There are large stretches in Queens and Richmond and the Bronx, nothing more than farm land, amid which five and six-story

tenement houses are going up. That should be restricted by law. It is serious not only for tenants in the outlying districts, but even for the business sections of the city. People in general are beginning to realize that unregulated building is not a wise thing for them, for their investment or for the community.

New York is doing little about city-planning. Many of the housing evils in this city have been due to the lot 100 feet deep, no matter what its width. Yet we are cutting up farm land and acreage to-day and making it into lots 20 feet by 120 and 100 feet. That is happening all over America, and it is preparing trouble for future generations. It could all be obviated by a wise study of the possibilities of the small lot of shallow depth, and sometimes of narrow width.

As to room overcrowding, no city in America has ever done anything. Some persons believe that it affects this community more than any other evil, but we have no data to warrant any definite conclusion.

Notwithstanding all these needs New York is strongly to be commended for having done so much. She has done more in the last ten years in the cause of housing reform than any other city in the world has done in the same length of time, and more than any other American city is doing to-day.